

KARIN LUTS – AN ARTIST AND HER TIME

Tiiu Talvistu

*At the art exhibition /K. Luts/
 Puddles and blotches
 make ellipses
 from curves from runs
 dropping autumn yellow
 into lakes of ultramarine.
 Painters' fields swell.
 Scythes rotate rod-arms' rows.
 Colour substance builds heavy walls
 where soldiers and workers triumphantly snore.
 We hammered the fingertips,
 nails applauded*

Nov 1958¹

The twentieth century is of unparalleled significance to Estonian art. During the first two decades of this tumultuous era, the first Estonian-born artists returned to live and work in their homeland. In 1919, shortly after the declaration of independence, the first national institution of art opened its doors in Tartu and soon attained the status of a higher-education establishment. The art school *Pallas* remained the only institution teaching depictive arts during the short life of the First Republic of Estonia from 1919 to 1940. The teaching staff mainly consisted of artists who had studied in various academies in St. Petersburg, Munich and Paris. Already among the first graduates of 1924, there was a woman, Natali Mei. However, the most distinguished female artist to graduate from *Pallas'* faculty of painting, Karin Luts (1904-1993), did so in 1928. The turbulent history of Estonia in the first half of the twentieth century shaped her life along similar lines to many of the cultural figures who lived there during this period. In 1944, when the Armies of Soviet Russia were marching ever closer, tens of thousands tried to flee Estonia in fear of repression and political terror, whether over the sea to Sweden or via land to Germany. Numerous artists took flight from their homeland, leaving behind their life and earlier works and found themselves in a new cultural environment. Writer Bernard Kangro, who also went into exile, wrote about his fellow sufferers, "An artist without his audience, without his exhibitions, and without the possibility to sell is stepping into a room without air. He may work, if there is a chance, but for whom? For how long?"²

Karin Luts was among those who left Estonia in small boats and started new lives in Sweden. She had to live through all the hardships and pains of moving to a new cultural environment, had to suffer losing her national identity, and find a new home and a new homeland. She left for good, never to return, not even when the political climate would have permitted it. Her relationship with Estonia was complicated and controversial, as was her relationship with Swedish culture and with the culture of her fellow refugees. A lot of her feelings can be understood through her diaries and through her correspondence with her sister and brother, both of whom were very close to her but never managed to leave Estonia.

The paradox of Karin Luts is further characterised by the fact that for the Swedish Art establishment she became the subject of deeper interest only in 2002. Through the collaborative efforts of the Tartu Art Museum and the Department of History and Theory of Art at Umeå University, a collection of articles were published in 2003 in the department's series, *Dialogues on Painting*, and dedicated to Karin Luts. In his article, Roland Spolander discussed the role of exiles in the art-life of Sweden after the Second World War:

The artists who almost have disappeared from memory in both their homelands and in Sweden, the new homeland (...) who inhabit the rupture of forgetfulness between different cultures, are numerous.³

A large exhibition of Karin Luts' work is scheduled for the autumn of 2004 in the Tartu Art Museum, where many of the works created in her two homelands, Estonia and Sweden, will be exhibited for the first time.

When Karin Luts entered the world of Estonian art at the end of the 1920s, a period of exploration and experimentation was coming to an end. The twenties can be described as a period of storm and upheaval, in which artists were quick to assimilate new, international influences. Just before the declaration of Estonian independence in 1918, younger artists were mesmerized by a wave of Symbolism and National Romanticism, whilst the events of war in Europe as well as in their homeland fanned the sparks of the Expressive movement. The period saw a steep rise in works influenced by the international avant-garde. Ado Vabbe can be called the first real avant-garde artist in Estonia. He met Vassily Kandinsky while studying in the A. Ažbé Art School in Munich, created his first abstract drawings, *Paraphrases*, in 1914, and reached Geometric Abstractionism influenced by Futurism in 1918. Vabbe was Karin Luts' main tutor of painting while she studied at *Pallas*. The taste of the Estonian art-audience was conservative and officials regarded avant-garde art with suspicion. Estonian artists' sensitivity towards developments occurring in the rest of Europe included awareness of the return to more realistic depictions of subjects, the motives behind this were derived from the political right-turn of many countries that in turn led to a more conservative way of life.

Luts stepped into the world of art at the beginning of these changes, when most influences still came from the upheaval and experimentation of the previous period. In her diaries Luts wrote about her wishes to be equal and respected as a female artist in a world dominated by men:

Do not think that art needs women, or men, - art needs a forceful ecstasy! – Do not draw your strength from gnashing your teeth at men, but rise yourself, despite what everybody thinks. The girls of Pallas – I tell you, art is not for dabbling– it is not, you must understand, before it is too late! Every woman – every creative artist – must be like iron!⁴

Among the students in Pallas there were quite a large number of women, but not all of them managed to gain a degree and, even in the newborn art scene in Estonia, men's careers progressed a lot more easily. The first female artists were accepted into the art society of *Pallas* only in 1939, that same year the first exhibition of female artists of Estonia took place. The interesting personality and work of Karin Luts has been a subject of interest for the feminist movement in Estonia. Luts has been studied from the feminist perspective by Estonian scholars Reet Varblane and Katrin Kivimaa in the magazine *Ariadne's Thread*.

Karin Luts' earliest works have an impressive range of subjects, the artist concentrates on biblical themes but interprets them in her own particular and slightly unreal fashion. Critics soon took notice of her original style and Jaan Pert wrote in the daily paper *Postimees*, "Her problems are more sombre, pithy, and bolder than the others."⁵ A somewhat ethereal appearance can be found in her works until the end of her career, though there are periods when it becomes very prominent. At the beginning of her career her two-dimensional, schematic figures resemble children's drawings. Even the eerie scene of *The Massacre of the Innocents* has a touch of naive childishness, and the horrendous crime becomes a dangerous game. The keyword that characterizes these compositions is "timeless". This is emphasised by the anonymous space and time where her characters act out their lives. In *Chess Players* the contestants are sitting thoughtfully behind a black-and-white table with one black and one white piece still in play. The men are painted over a brick-red carpet in this flat frontal composition that, whilst being a floor covering, still manages to become the backdrop for the whole scene creating a

feeling of an artistic tapestry within a painting. The same effect is achieved in the self-portrait, *The Gardener*. The beaming young woman in the front is leaning on her pitchfork over the backdrop of recently tidied flowerbeds. Because of that same two-dimensional appearance the rows of flowerbeds turn into a gallery of pillars. These works by the young artist, many of which have only survived as photographs, introduce her as a bit of a showy, but deeply thoughtful creator. Aside from the effective motifs and deformation of figures, the message of each picture and its philosophical-symbolistic meaning are equally important for Luts. Critics of that time associated her work with foreign influences, namely with Otto Dix and Marc Chagall, due to the fact that there were no local analogues.

This early experimental period in Luts' works was fairly short. In 1928, after graduating from *Pallas*, she earned a scholarship and moved to Paris. She took drawing classes at the *Académie de la Grande Chaumière* where she was tutored by André Lhote, who had already taught other Estonian artists. Luts lived in Paris for almost a year and this period had a significant influence on her development. When she came back from her studies her style had changed; she began to pay a lot of attention to the nuances of her paintings' colouring. The appearance of the figures changed as well, acquired form, becoming fleshed out, they lost the comic look that resembled children's drawings, but retained a characteristic timeless quality. Luts was not a fast painter; her pictures developed over a long creative period, usually many sketches and pages full of drawings on the subject preceded each painting. The first painting bearing the marks of this new style is a figural-composition from 1932 entitled *Funeral Guests*. It is a connecting link between the early Luts and her work in the 1930s. Colouring is light and translucent, as are the four semi-transparent young women, all bearing the same face and looking other-worldly. Maybe the most important painting of this period is the silver *Candidates for Confirmation* from 1936. Two young chubby and pink-cheeked girls are stepping over a globe-like hillock in front of a church that seems to gleam from the sky. The blonde girl on the left has lowered her eyes shyly, the brunette on the right, however, is looking straight and somewhat defiantly at the viewer. They look alike, as if they were the two sides of one self.

The next change in Karin Luts' work again occurred thanks to a scholarship to another country. This time it took her to pre-war Italy in 1939. There she was engrossed by the symbioses of the ancient and the modern, the way all the centuries of history and traditions could be seen in the paintings of contemporary artists. She was spellbound by the works of Giorgio Morandi, Mario Sironi, Massimo Campigli, and Filippo de Pisis, all of whom influenced Estonian artists during the Second World War, and for some time even after that. The changes in her work can once again be seen first in her colouring, which become airy, even ethereal and unearthly, melting the shape of objects and the space surrounding them into one, creating unreal landscapes. *Comédie Française* depicts two women sitting in front of a glowing-red backdrop, their figures and faces dissolving into the light [Pl. 4]. *Fisher Girl on the Beach* has a metaphysical atmosphere in which the body of the girl who tries to shade her eyes with her hands has merged with the light; the borders of her body are no more, she has become one with the all-enveloping light. The same mood is shared by Luts' still-lives. The objects are placed into the rays of light flooding from a window, thus losing their substance and form and becoming immaterial. In her earlier works Luts created a bewitching atmosphere through the two-dimensional and frontal structure of her paintings, as if the figures and objects have been placed inside a vacuum of light and air. Now, she concentrated all her efforts on light and colour, which fills the whole canvas, turning it into a small unreal world.

Emotionally many of her works are elegiac, containing hidden mournful signs of farewell. It's as if Luts sensed that another period of her life was coming to an end and that her future was shadowed by the unknown. In 1943 she completed a painting entitled *Expecters* in which three women are sitting on a bench, their frozen forms suggesting a deep sense of anticipation. They are sitting on the same bench, yet they don't share any physical contact, each one of them encapsulated in her own little world, concentrating on the anticipation of things to come. The philosophical subtext suggests that waiting and anticipation is part of every person's life, and at the same time this suggestion creates yet again the feeling of timelessness. This painting also has a deep and direct connection with Karin Luts' destiny. In

the autumn of 1944 she fled across the sea in a small boat, leaving behind her home, her work, two sisters, and a brother. In Sweden, Karin Luts received a letter from her sister in Estonia who was waiting on the small island of Kihnu for her chance of escape. "The people are in panic," she wrote, "There are about a thousand refugees on this island. I turn to you in my last hope, but I fear that this is too late and in vain. If we can't go on, we will turn back towards certain death. Goodbye and farewell."⁶ Her sister remained in Estonia for there were no boats sailing to freedom anymore.

Karin Luts wrote many letters back to her sister, but they remained unsent due to the difficult political relationships with Soviet Union that prevent any communication between the West and Soviet Estonia. Real correspondence started again only in 1956. Right after she arrived in Sweden, Luts wrote:

Art is more lively here. There's scarcely a time without new exhibitions. Larger and smaller. The artists themselves cannot be counted; I think, there must be at least tens of thousands of them. It's hard to make one's debut here, because the taste and ideals are different from ours, as well. They think that our style is out-dated, naturalistic.⁷

She also discussed her own paintings and their subjects:

I have only tried to paint the figures and faces I have always dreamt about (...) I remember all the events of the past and it feels heavy like a dramatic film. All those wartime events and conditions (...) And I want to introduce these miseries to others – and I get visions, of ruins, of shelters, of flights.⁸

Her older sister was like a mother to Luts and after their separation she felt alone and bereft of anyone to share her thoughts with. Luts could be considered an introvert for she had no close friends though she got married right before her flight when she was almost forty. Thanks to her husband's position, she could afford to paint and later explore graphic arts. She had the opportunity to spend summers abroad, most of which she chose to spend in Italy, where she visited the biennales of Venice, and in France. These journeys also took her to Spain, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands and Great Britain. During the time she was away from home, she felt open to the world again; in 1950 in Paris she wrote, "I feel good here, almost as well as when I was younger. I've become serener and free (...) – sometimes I have lost all sense of what is real – I believe that Estonia still exists, that there has been no war, nor any asylum in Sweden."⁹

Right after coming to Sweden, two exhibitions were organized by Estonian artists. The first in 1945, in Värmland, and the second in 1946, an especially monumental joint-exhibition with Latvian artists, in the Liljevalchs gallery in Stockholm. The reception among Swedish critics was rather tepid. After these two, the refugees put up exhibitions in smaller galleries, later in different Estonian Houses. This choice of venues was one of the greatest barriers between the artists and local critics. The attention these exhibitions received was almost non-existent. Luts was not satisfied with the opportunity to have her work presented only alongside the work of her fellow refugees. The artistic standard of these exhibitions was uneven and professional work was hung on the same walls as the works of dilettantes. Eduard Rüga, another artist seeking refuge, wrote about an exhibition of Estonian art in the United States, "We don't have sufficient funds to put on an exhibition in one of the more famous galleries and Estonians here need the towers of St. Olaf's church of Tallinn, the moonlit nights, and sweet little pictures of national costumes."¹⁰

Karin Luts was timid by nature; she was afraid of negative criticism and feared being rejected by exhibition juries. In the early days one of the reasons for this may well have been her absence of Swedish citizenship, which she however received, together with her husband, in 1952. She still felt cut off from Swedish artists because until the beginning of 1960s she did not belong to any of their organisations. She painted at home where there was not much room and she could not work all the time. This spiritual recession can be called "being in exile"; it has been named and written about by

many writers who have been forced to leave their home country. In an interview, the writer Joseph Brodsky has described this feeling, "When I arrived here, I told myself not to over-dramatize what has happened to me, to act as if nothing had happened. (...) But for the first two or three years I felt as if I was only acting, not living. (...) Now I feel that the mask has grown to my face."¹¹ It is to be expected, therefore, that this "recession" should be visible in the works of an artist, but its expression may be ambiguous.

In her diaries, Luts opened up and discussed the state of her spirit and various events of her life, "I don't belong to any country. I am sitting on the borders," or, "Life in clamps", and even in 1980, "I am apolitical. The word "exile" irritates me. It is terrible to be a refugee, especially in Sweden." After her arrival in Sweden Luts mainly painted about her suffering during the war. These paintings are figural compositions, the subjects of which gaze at you in a way that remains to haunt you. The figures themselves are static, frozen in their poses and the atmosphere of these compositions are as full of tension as is that of *Expecters* from 1943. In 1947 Luts' painted *Episode*, which depicts two female figures in their bridal dresses. One of them stands in a shaft of light, wearing a long, flowing white dress with a dove sitting on her hand; the other one, standing in the shadows and seems to be wearing a blank grey dress and holding a bouquet of flowers. Once again these two women seem to be the two sides of one self or of one soul, as in the earlier painting *Candidates for Confirmation*. These figures, however, lack the shy bewitching beauty of those young girls who are about step into the turmoil of life.

Early in the 1950s, Luts started to consider different artistic subjects in her diaries. She criticised her own works, "I'm too feminine – yearful and courteous. Dilettante and out of date."¹² She now became interested in abstract art and moved towards it in her paintings, "I have always tried to abstract everything, but not because everybody does it, but because I want to contrast my works to realism. I feel that it has been dehorned, it is trying to copy nature and life itself."¹³ Right before leaving her home country, colour had arisen as the most important aspect of Luts' works. Kristi Burman wrote in her article, 'Entering Colour', about the relationship between Luts and her colours and highlighted the works that she had done right before going into exile.

From the carefully placed highlights in her first works to the vibrating pattern of thin white lines in her latest pre-exile paintings, the artist's relation with white probably reflects best her changed relation with colour, revealed by the changed gestures of her hand in the act of painting. No wonder that also her several non-figurative works include white fluttering forms [which] seem to expand within the picture space. She maintains her trust in the balancing quality of white, whether in broad fields, shadings or thin lines, which in later works display the colour in strict and no longer oscillating gestures.¹⁴

In her diaries, Karin Luts writes about the colour white on many occasions.

Luts moved towards non-figurative art at a slow pace. Her first attempts were made at the beginning of 1950s; by the end of the decade, however, she began to feel quite free to explore the possibilities of this new form. In these later paintings she got her inspiration from nature and tried to visually convey music and motion through the compositions. "I would like for these paintings to be dominated by some intensive mood that would have its roots in the colours. Some sort of distinguished and special atmosphere."¹⁵ Luts tried to free the colours from forms and tried to give them independent functions. Once again the colour white has an important, sometimes central position in her paintings; it conveys the idea and expresses different eternal values. For example, the white floating objects in *Flight and Fugue*, which represent simultaneously the endless fields of arctic ice or movement in some borderless space or the sounds of an invisible symphony. It is interesting to note that Luts' schoolmates and friends from *Pallas*, be they in exile or in politically thawing Soviet Russia, started to paint abstract compositions almost at the same time. A non-figurative style can even be found in the works of Ado Vabbe, the tutor of Karin Luts, who still lived in Estonia and who was once the forerunner of this style.

In the beginning of 1960s, Luts became interested in graphic techniques, among which she was most mesmerized by colour etching. Due to the possibility to change the underlying metal plates over and over, graphic art was suitable for her questioning and doubtful nature. In her diary she wrote, "Where would it be better to hide my sadness, my anger, my dreams, or my misfortunes, than to etch them into a plate of copper with a sharp pin."¹⁶ But even in graphics Luts remained a painter; paying close attention to colour and using different materials like sugar and nets to create interesting effects. In her compositions, she explored mythology, once again returning to the figure. The finished works contain winged valkyries and ancient warriors who live in their own unreal world. The titles of Luts' graphic series, *Lyric Confessions* and *Psychic Conflicts*, reflect the inner conflicts and spiritual state of the artist. She was haunted by her own loneliness and lack of a partner with whom to share the problems and questions that she had to face in her creative process and her personal life. Luts' husband had burrowed deep into his own linguistic studies and thus neither of them could, or wanted, to offer emotional support for the other. She had also not made any close contacts with other Estonian artists living in Sweden or with native Swedish artists. Luts knew that there was a chasm between herself as an artist and the art-world of Sweden, she was also doubtful if Estonian art had enough strength to thrive in exile. In her diaries she wrote:

No fragment of a nation can have its own culture on a foreign soil. First you have to understand the new environment and assimilate – and this only out of the need to continue your existence. Cultivating your culture in isolation is a personal affair. Whether your audience recognizes your efforts or not depends already on them. I don't think that Swedes would actually be interested in the invading art and culture of Estonia.¹⁷

In her early works, Luts was interested in eternal and biblical subjects, which through her interpretation acquired unreal and unearthly new meanings. In 1960s she once again returned to her surreal treatments. In her diaries, she mused:

I am still looking for the people I know (in myself). Maybe I will recognize them in the end and find them a place in my new paintings. But they aren't real human beings, yet. That I know. They are human dreams. They are symbols for some line of thought or for some psychological state. They might be white torsos of wood or of plaster; pale and numb and bloodless, whitewashed silhouettes, of whom some stand like pawns and some like dolls, waiting to be placed...¹⁸

Often times her subjects share a physical resemblance with herself, becoming self-portraits; this started already in the 1920s and continued through different creative periods. In *Cat's Poem to the Night* from 1973 the cat looks at us with Luts' face. In her last paintings the storyline holds an important position. She used different symbols, hearts, paragraphs, playing cards, letters, suits of armour and her pictures have numerous subtexts, many of which were understandable only to the artist herself. Often in the centre of it all is a human figure, usually a woman, whose face belongs to Luts. It seems that these surreal paintings have a close relationship to the artist's life, but at the same time show the suffering common to the whole of humanity. In works from the 1970s, such as *Manipulator*, *The Saga of Freedom* and *Red Paragraph*, Luts meditated on the subject of freedom, not only from her own or an individual viewpoint, but also on a universal scale. Every individual is like a pawn on the chessboard of life where unpredictable forces sway their destinies but in the end everybody has to make their own moves.

When Karin Luts left Estonia in 1944, she was the most renowned female Estonian artist; almost fifty years later she died in Sweden unknown and unrecognised. The works she created in exile are in turn almost unknown in her homeland. In his article 'Karin Luts – or the Dilemma of the Monologue', Roland Spolander wrote:

If now the art of drawing is about revealing structures and teaching us to see more of the world we already believe to be seeing, writing of history is also about gazing deeply into our memories, about increasing our memories with what has fallen into forgetfulness and about provoking our picture of reality so that we as humans once again become vulnerable, living and reliant on each other.¹⁹

¹ K. Luts, *Diary*, 1956, Archives of Estonian Literature Museum.

² B. Kangro, *Estland i Sverige*, Lund 1976.

³ R. Spolander, 'Karin Luts – or the dilemma of the monologue', in *Dialogues on Painting*, DOCUMENT VII /Studies in Art and Art History/ Dep of Art History Umeå University, Umeå 2003, 71.

⁴ K. Luts, *Diary*, 1926, Archives of Estonian Literature Museum.

⁵ J. P(ert), 'Kunstikool "Pallase" lõpetajate tööde näitus', *Postimees*, 20. may 1928.

⁶ L. Huik, *Letter to Karin Luts*, 1944, Archives of Estonian Literature Museum.

⁷ K. Luts, *Letter to sister Lonni Huik*, 1944, Archives of Estonian Literature Museum.

⁸ K. Luts, *Letter to sister Lonni Huik*, 1945, Archives of Estonian Literature Museum.

⁹ K. Luts, *Diary*, 1950, Archives of Estonian Literature Museum.

¹⁰ E. Rüga, *Letter to Karin Luts*, 1954, Archives of Estonian Literature Museum.

¹¹ J. Brodsky, *Поэзия – лучшая школа неуверенности. Большая книга интервью*, 2000, 67.

¹² K. Luts, *Diary*, 1949, Archives of Estonian Literature Museum.

¹³ K. Luts, *Diary*, 1953, Archives of Estonian Literature Museum.

¹⁴ K. Burman, 'Entering colour', in *Dialogues on Painting*, DOCUMENT VII /Studies in Art and Art History/ Dep. of Art History Umeå University, Umeå 2003, 81.

¹⁵ K. Luts, *Diary*, 1970, Archives of Estonian Literature Museum.

¹⁶ K. Luts, *Letter to artist Arno Vihalemm*, 1964, Archives of Estonian Literature Museum.

¹⁷ K. Luts, *Diary*, 1980, Archives of Estonian Literature Museum.

¹⁸ K. Luts, *Diary*, 1964, Archives of Estonian Literature Museum.

¹⁹ R. Spolander, 'Karin Luts – or the dilemma of the monologue', in *Dialogues on Painting*, DOCUMENT VII /Studies in Art and Art History/ Dep. of Art History Umeå University, Umeå 2003, 71. This quote has been amended for clarity by the Editor.